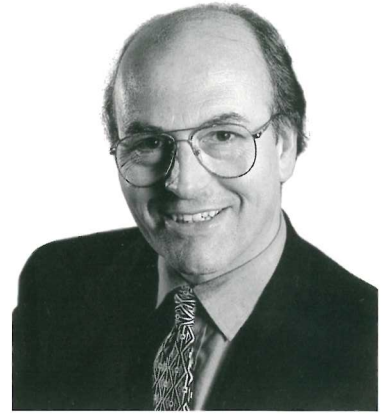


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Pilgrimage, Search and a New Belonging

by Martin Robinson



Many observers have noted that together with an upsurge of interest in spirituality and retreats, pilgrimage has made a surprising return in the popular affection of many. Clearly this rise of interest flows from some much broader shifts in our culture.

It is worth making one observation about the cultural shifts we are currently witnessing. A new century has just dawned. Although we can talk about the centuries in cultural terms, larger cultural movements don't coincide with the precise turn of the century. Most would date the nineteenth century as actually beginning with the French Revolution in 1789. Many historians think of the twentieth century as beginning with the end of the Edwardian period in 1910 and so on. Arguably our new century began in political terms as long ago as 1989 with the symbolic fall of the Berlin Wall.

The BBC, in their recent documentary series, *The People's Century*, echoed that date with the suggestion that the last two decades have witnessed the return of God to centre stage. AN Wilson in his challenging book, *God's Funeral* begins with the sentence, "The God-question does not go away. No sooner have the intelligentsia of one generation confined the Almighty to the history books than popular opinion rises against them."

It is unwise to be tempted to think that this new century is witnessing the return of faith such that we need worry no longer about the decline in church attendance and the departure of the Christian Church from a position of clear leadership in society. In truth, the so-called return of God is a complex matter.

The quest for God and for spiritual encounter is not a simple matter. Spirituality is seen as good,

while religion is seen as bad. Spiritual experiences, including monastic retreats are welcome, but the institutional life that sustains them is rejected. In the midst of much that seems to be contradictory, confusing and yet strangely compelling in our culture, the theme of pilgrimage, of journey, with its implied feeling of search and discovery seems to me to be a helpful motif and I offer three areas where pilgrimage contributes enormously to the religious cornucopia of our present time.

Perspective

Firstly, pilgrimage offers the possibility of perspective.

Edward Bailey who runs the Network for Implicit Religion from his vicarage in Winterbourne near Bristol, has spoken of the comments of many who remark on the strange fact that in contrast with most Anglican churches, his church building is located outside of the village. This is not an accident but was a deliberate intent on the part of the Celtic founders of the congregation. Here we see two views of mission. The one stresses involvement, integration, the church at and as the centre of the community. Clearly this model of mission has its strengths and attractions but it also has its own profound problems. What happens when the community no longer sees the church as important in its life? What if the community sees the church as part of a cultural life that the new culture is only too eager to escape, to reject and leave behind as failed and discredited?

The second model, the one favoured by the Celtic founders of Bailey's congregation, favoured separation, not as isolation but as providing sufficient distance to

provide perspective. The gift of such a church is to separate the secular and the sacred with just enough space that the secular can be seen from a sacred perspective. This different perspective offers the possibility of being refreshed to re-enter the secular fray.

Pilgrimage operates in a similar way for our present time. Surveys undertaken amongst those who actually go on pilgrimage suggest that many take place at times of significance in people's lives. Not all those who embark on pilgrimage are devout believers. Some are simply curious, others are not even certain what they seek but travel hopefully.

The particular stimulus for any one pilgrimage may vary greatly from one individual to another. For some, it might be the fulfilment of a long held dream; for others, the death of a loved one. Some may have in mind the fulfilment of a pledge or promise. Some might undertake the journey in gratitude for an answered prayer. Still others wish to review the direction of their life. But whatever the particular stimulus, there is often the core intent, not always well expressed, that the individual seeks a new vista, a new place, a place of significance, from which to revisit the story of his or her own life journey. The particular journey represents the broader life journey.

If that new perspective is important for individual lives, it is also true for our broader cultural longings. It is as if our whole culture yearns for a pilgrimage through which to reflect more deeply on where we are going and where we have come from. That perspective needs to be seen not in months and years, not even in single lifetimes, but in generations and centuries.

AN Wilson, in the book to which I have already referred, deals with the theme of the death of God in terms of centuries. He suggests that the notion of the funeral of God so acutely felt throughout much of the twentieth-century was actually a nineteenth century problem and that prophetic voices in the twentieth century are pointing us towards a new life of faith in the coming time.

Tom Beaudoin, in *Virtual Faith*, suggests that in this time of new faith the very ambiguity and uncertainty expressed by the so called Generation X might actually be a gift to the Church. The present generation is calling us to a unique pilgrimage of rediscovery, to a profound reshaping of what we mean by the community of faith.

Identity

Second, pilgrimage offers us an opportunity to explore the issues of identity.

Many social commentators have noted that contemporary culture offers few certainties with regard to a common sense of belonging. The question, "who am I?" is a redolent theme for a number of generations in the Western world. The fact that pilgrimage can often contain a search for identity is illustrated by a story from the warden of a popular centre of pilgrimage, Iona "...you'd be amazed at the number of people who get off that ferry and say: 'I feel, at last, I am at home.' What on earth do they mean? Many of them aren't even Scottish! You see people actually hugging the stones."

The experience of pilgrimage that led to the sense of homecoming is not just related to Iona. It is a common theme reported by many pilgrims who arrive at what they perceive to be holy or rooted places. It is also true that those who have interviewed pilgrims report that some find the point of arrival to be one of disappointment. Whether one experiences homecoming or disappointment, the commonality of experience is the search for rootedness, for identity.

A number of writers on pilgrimage comment on this theme and I quote from two very different such accounts:

The first is a psychological account of the nature of pilgrimage:

"But who, then, is the Centre of the world? That is precisely the question posed to the infant when, after being one with his mother, he begins to distinguish 'others' from 'himself'. When we study children's drawings, we note that their rough sketches of circles coincide with the age at which they are, in fact, beginning to be aware of their individuality. At this stage, conflict is inevitable and one could present a genetic psychology whose starting point would be this notion of the 'Centre' which lies at the very heart of affective space. In so doing, it would become abundantly clear that the path which leads from the self back to the self goes round the world by way of the Other... we must agree in the light of these reflections that here, too, the pilgrim's quest has its deep roots in a human condition; man's search for the Centre."¹

The second quotation is from that well-known writer on spirituality who currently directs the pilgrimages of Jesuit noviciates in Birmingham, Gerard Hughes.

"I left the fountain and walked into St Peter's, entering by the door which is opened only for the Holy Year, a sign of God's continuous indulgence to us all ... I thought of my own family, living and dead, of my relations, friends, acquaintances who have given me so much and I thanked God for them.

"I don't think you know who you are.' Laura had said this to me eight years before, a comment which had disturbed and distressed me. Now at the end of the pilgrimage I could see the truth of it and thank God for it. It no longer distressed: it gave me hope and encouragement. I don't know who I am. None of us know who we are, because God created us for himself and we shall never know who we are until we are at one with him."²

Vocation

Third, pilgrimage represents a search for our true vocation.

It is not just a matter of discovering who we are but also of discovering what God intends us to be and to do for him. In this important sense pilgrimage is not a selfish act of self-discovery but one in which we seek to discover what we might be able to give.

For the great Celtic saints, pilgrimage was even more than this. It represented not just a search for vocation, pilgrimage was actually a vocation in itself. This was possible because the Celtic saints saw pilgrimage as intimately connected with mission. It was a journey for Christ more than for themselves. The journey to which they were called was one of witness, of actually forming the church wherever they found themselves to be.

For me, that is the key challenge that one might adopt for a time such as this. If our intention is merely to discuss pilgrimage for its own sake then we miss the very point of pilgrimage. Of course, there is a connection between our own self-discovery and the task of mission. We need to discover the central reality of God if we are to engage in mission.

Perspective, Identity and Vocation: these are the themes I offer. We enter the pilgrim way not with any certainties but with hope. That hope is necessarily centred in Christ and is nourished by him.

This edition of *TransMission* explores the notion of hope in the context of journey or search. Walter Brueggemann points to the counter-cultural themes contained in the Old Testament and in particular to the way in which God offers alternatives to despair and denial. Geoffrey Smith invites us to consider an arguably more controversial journey as a Christian cathedral attempts to offer an exploration of faith in the context of the Faiths. Shirley du Boulay explores the way in which pilgrimage as an externalisation of the sacred offers us a resource which brings personal hope.

The journey for the Christian church in this present age seems to be a troublesome and difficult path. There are few certainties that come to us from our cultural surroundings. The certainties offered by faith need to be unpacked and understood. Our intention is that the pages of *TransMission* might be a place where difficulty and faith intersect.

Notes

¹ Dumoulin, Anne. "Towards a Psychological Understanding of the Pilgrim" in *Lumen Vitae* No. 1, Vol. XXXII (1977), pp. 112-113

² Hughes, Gerard. *In Search of a Way: Two Journeys of Spiritual Discovery*, DLT, 1984.